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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on book-centered and "non-book" children and the role of the Internet in changing literature and children's reading habits. Highlights include diversity in children's books; differing magazine readership across the continents; the concept of narrative; the problem of book-centered children becoming outsiders in a more technology-oriented environment; the "classics" and literary standards; changes brought about by computers; and the evolution of a new female-dominated "intermedia" era. It is suggested that the role of the library may either become that of the archive or that of the interstices of the net, the facilitator, the traffic police. (AEF)

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The Child, the Book, and the Internet

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To close an international conference, of an organization concerned with books and children, you have a contradiction in terms: a children's literature theorist, interested in where children's books come from and go to. It seems appropriate that at what seems to be an historical turning point in the way in which texts are mediated to children we should explore the future of children-and-books internationally; address no less a subject than the World as it Is and the World as it is Going to Be!

And I would like to begin with Internationalism, something which in the past, may have been an ideal; in the future it seems likely to be a necessity.

I have recently completed the Routledge *Encyclopedia of Children's Literature* which contains among its 450,000 wordsand 34 articles something about virtually every country or region.

Children's books are often, perhaps sentimentally, seen as a hope for the world, a unifying force, and as an anti-nationalist, a globalist, I might be expected to proclaim this view. Unfortunately, my editing experience left me feeling really rather ambivalent. It turned out to be a ticklish political problem: what is Politically Correct? Even in selecting the countries and areas to be covered there were sensitivities to be taken into account, which resulted, for example, in there being two entries on Germany, and two on Canada. I also realized that I was, am, hopelessly Anglo-centric. The point of revelation came while I was editing Anne Pellowski's article on internationalism, and I found that I didn't know how to enter a name in the bibliography. Which was the patronymic? First, second? Did it matter?

I then began to realize that there is no universal mindset towards the child or children's literature. The realization that concepts of story, of value, of purpose, of the significance of the book, let alone of the child, were hugely varied came as a shock. As Shirley Brice Heath put it, these matters become the concern of the anthropologist for

> In the final decades of the twentieth century, children's literature, like certain food, songs, forms of play, and health provisions, could be acknowledged as being native only to certain societies. (*The Braid of Literature*, 180)

I was left with an impression of vast diversity, of illuminated items and recurrent themes. For example, the American world authority on children's magazines, Marianne Carus, informed me that 75% of children read magazines in North America, whereas readership in the UK is disappointing; in Russia political change has meant a decline in the numbers of magazines, while in Africa, there are many but they are short lived. Anne Pellowski pointed out in her work across cultures that Islamic culture precludes the use of pictures in certain sorts of literature, and that picture books are distributed at Buddhist ceremonies honoring recently deceased family members. In the shift from oral to written culture, there can be problems of orthographies not adequately presenting the language.

In some cultures, the very concept of the Book seems to be in question: here is Birgit Dankert on Africa:

> These cultural imports elicited then (and still elicit today) the same ambivalent mixture of respect and rejection which characterizes African reactions to so many other borrowings from former colonial powers.

Obviously, this is cultural colonialism which can also be seen in terms of the colonization of childhood. Even that obvious method of breaking down cultural barriers, translation, suffers from gross Anglo-centricity: very few titles indeed are translated into the dominant world language.

All of this leads to some uncomfortable questions. Can we make any generalizations about the book and the child, because the value of the book varies, and childhood is not able to be defined except very locally? What on earth do we have in common around the world? It seems that

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children's literature is as likely to be more divisive than uniting. Athough that might be no bad thing in that it can be anti-colonial, stressing local culture and nationalism, and producing propaganda.

On the other hand, the world is wide, and we might take comfort in its diversity; the bibliographies of the *Encyclopedia* yield some intriguing titles -- from Nigeria: D. O. Fagunwa's *Forest of A Thousand Deamons*. On the very first page, the reader is given a direct instruction to treat the book as though the author were a drummer performing the story and they, the listeners, were dancing out the appropriate responses... Finland: *Sigmund Freud's Fatal Cold*; Sweden: *Else-Marie and the Seven Fathers*; Holland: *Slowly, As Fast as They Could*; Spain: *The Same Stone*; Portugal: *Noah's Ark, Third Class*; Germany: *Proletarian Fairy-Tales*; *What Does the Mouse Think on Thursday*; Austria: *The Granny in the Apple Tree*; Poland: *The Bottomless Jug*; Lithuania: *White Wind*; Israel: *A New Hat*; Urdu: *Cricket Match*; Mongolia: *The Snap of the Whip*; Japan: *Candyfloss*...and books with untranslatable titles.

Thus my first conclusion is that this diversity may be inspiring to some, bewildering to others,but what could possibly bind them together? It cannot be a concept of "childhood," which differs from day to day, from street to street. Could it be the "common myth-kitty"? Are all stories the same story? A Maurice Saxby argues:

> While folk and fairy-tale, myth, legend and epic hero tales are all threads of one vast story, it would seem that myth, a universal phenomenon, is the progenitor...Mythology gives rise to ceremony and ritual, an ongoing necessity in human behavior [e.g. tribal in Northern Ireland, or in Universities] ... Moreover, myth is rich in symbols, and human existence is governed largely by metaphor.

That sounds optimistic, but the implications of something so reductionist may be that the stories are not actually interesting of themselves, and that they can be processed into anything. Or could it be that we (when we talk about children and books) bound by certain common beliefs and common socioeconomic drives? There is a worldwide belief that literacy is essential, for all sorts of good reasons from reducing infant mortality onwards. As Sheila Ray suggests

> There is a similar underlying pattern throughout all this, a progression from the oral to the written, influenced by and social, economic conditions in virtually all cultures.

Or is it the universal appeal of Narrative? Margaret Meek's introduction to the *Encyclopedia* suggests that narrative the most common theme to emerge - and yet Western culture has tended to downgrade narrative. As E. M. Forster lamented:

> Yes - oh dear yes - the novel tells a story...That is the highest factor common to all novels [and children's books], and I wish it were not so, that it could be something different - melody, or perception of truth, not this low atavistic form. For the more we look at the story...the less we shall find to admire. (*Aspects of the Novel*, 40)

But it is important that we do not see narrative in western terms. Anne Pellowski:

> But many cultures have stories (and other cultural artifacts) that are expressed chiefly in circular or spiral terms. There might be a "beginning" but there is no real "middle" or "end". Cumulative stories in some cultures do not have a climactic event that then triggers actions moving stories to a final conclusion...Instead there is a...series of events that can go on *ad infinitum*; they can begin or end at almost any point.

But every writer in the book endorsed the idea of narrative as what Barbara Hardy memorably called "a primary act of mind", and there is a widespread view, voiced by Aidan Chambers that:

> In every language, in every part of the world, Story is the fundamental grammar of all thought and communication...By telling ourselves *what happened, to whom, and why* we not only discover ourselves and the world, but we change and create ourselves and the world too. (*Booktalk*, 59)

Narrative, then, is important, although in precisely what way is not so clear.

Childhood, myth, narrative - all of these let us down if we are trying to make sense of the past.

What, then of the future? I would like to offer two images: and to explore their implications.

The first is in England; breakfast time, in my house. There is one daughter reading a book on the stairs, another reading over her breakfast, and another reading while playing the piano. We have no TV: we're a book family; Amy, aged ten, has forty seven books around her bed; we read books, aloud, each evening; Chloe has been unable to sleep, from the age of fifteen months, without books under her pillow; we have over five thousand children's books in the house; they all have library cards charged to the limit; Saturday morning sees them dressing up as book characters and acting out complex versions of *Swallows and Amazons* or *Little House on the Prairie*.

My second image is in the house of a friend of mine in Boston, Massachusetts. There I found some books, two computer terminals and my friend's daughter, aged ten, surfing the internet.

Is one of these images a past ideal, the other the future?

Let us take first my book-centered children; are they the culmination of our ambition for literacy--what school librarians everywhere would aim at? After all, other children visiting our house have a problem: they don't know how to listen to stories. And so my children's lifestyle is the result of a belief in a certain kind of childhood which has within it a faith in reading--a faith that lies behind almost all concepts of literature and literacy, a faith that privileges certain kind of reading--what Aidan Chambers called "intergalactic" rather than "flat-earth" reading. And hidden behind its reasonableness is an allegiance to a particular world-view of reading's possibilities and benefits, and a further belief that certain sorts of books supply this kind of experience.

And as a result, my children are becoming outsiders to their peer group who inhabit a non-book culture: to their friends, books=school. In their peer culture, the book is often downgraded as "other".

All this is very divisive, often along social class lines, and therefore I would argue strongly that we should pay attention to the fact that "non-book" children are inevitably getting a kind of enjoyment--making a kind of meaning that is inaccessible to us, and which may, ironically, fulfil the concepts of "literary readings" held by "book people". We should not in our turn denigrate "flat-earth" reading: reading is reading is reading; book reading should not be privileged over other forms of story/media experience.

Thus we should regard "literature" as an inappropriate term for the discussion of children's reading; it is a repressive concept, designed, perhaps, to make sense of a huge quantity of textual material. The approved "classics" - as validated in a series like Oxford University Press's World's Classics - represent perhaps two books a year out of countless millions. The canonical concept of literature (and of art) excludes unimaginable talent: after all, one day's output of fashion magazines probably represents more artistic talent, ingenuity, and even genius, than the previous five hundred years. A particular world view of stratification, control, discrimination, is inherent in the idea of literary standards which claim to be (or aspire to be) authoritative but which are actually like the emperor's clothes.

If we are tapping into this mystery of what meaning children make from books, we have to see them making it within their own culture, as well as in relationship to other cultures (such as that which validates "literature"). And perhaps even more seriously, if we see certain kinds of books and certain kinds of narrative as inferior or *unrewarding*, then we are potentially ignoring the vast impact of *other media* - writing and text in the broadest possible sense, and thus losing touch with the inevitable future. Whose culture will it be, anyway?

Which brings us to the second image: Surfing the Internet. That "surfing" image seems to me to be remarkably apposite. Surfing is free, fast, skillful, dangerous, and on the surface - but what a surface! And it is not for the unfit, or the old; it is essentially new, exhilarating, and not exclusive. Computer surfing gives the surfer access to the world: to millions of users, links, bits and styles of information - in fact, to a different kind of story. **NOT** just a different way of telling the same story, but a different kind of story.

If you hear an echo here, it may be of Aidan Chambers; in 1982, talking about "The Child's Changing Story", he had an idea of what was in the wind. He saw the great concepts for change as Relativity, Space exploration, Gender, Nuclear Fission, and (in 1982, looking for a word) Television

"or the microelectronic book". Chambers noted how TV changes not only the form of story, but potentially changes story itself. In fact, I doubt if that has happened very widely - television has proved itself to be, in a sense, a machine for reading the narrative forms. Chambers also mentioned a passing craze, that of "choose-your-own-adventure" books, and pondered on the way in which it changed the relation between writer and reader: who was now responsible for the story?

Of course, the early "choose-your-own-adventure" books were actually simple, linear, and not really free; the recent transference of the idea to the multi-media computer made the game more complex, but essentially it remained the same.

But what the concept did do, was to focus or crystallize some fundamental changes for the westernized reader: quite simply it changed the concept of narrative. With the Internet, we can interact with all manner of stories--remake, revise--we can change the narrative: change the pattern. We are, in fact, in a regressive process, perhaps, back to the non-written era. We have been spectators of story for a long time; now we can become involved, as actors and writers; first you make up the endings from the choices given to you - and then you become the narrator and make your own endings.

To produce an internet narrative, or a hypertext narrative, we are rapidly approaching not so much the death of the author as the birth of a million authors, and the materials from which they construct those stories is nothing less than the minds of all the planet.

This is true of both content and form: we are no longer bound by the myth-kitty: in those early "choose-your-own-adventure" series it was possible for the authors to take almost any genre and present chapters which were "standard" scenes, elements, plotemes. That is not necessary now! Similarly, narrative: the ways in which the elements of the stories are presented/woven /imaged is now changed; video bytes, fragments, distortions, sound, vision, word, virtual reality...the necessities of linear organization no longer apply. There are new logics--fuzzy/hyper/simultaneous - true multi-media activities are available. Tte fragments become building blocks in an immeasurably complex way. We become actors and authors.

The implications are huge from the progressive decay of authoritarian rule to the idea that keyboard skills are more important than handwriting. Is not only the book, but the written word, a thing of the past? Aidan Chambers, recognizing that relativity leads towards chaos, wrote:

> It seems...important to me, especially in writing for young people, not to submit to incoherence, but to search out new patterns of coherence and ways of making stories that represent these new patterns. This is indeed the narrative problem of our time. If we ignore it and retreat into the old ways, or simply suffocate in incoherence, then Story will fail us and our literature will become one long suicide note! (*Booktalk*, 67)

And, although he didn't mean to, C. S. Lewis contributes directly to this. His central image in his seminal article, "Of Stories" (1947) was of a net. Narrative is a net in which we catch something else..."

> In real life, as in a story, something must happen. That is just the trouble. We grasp at a state and find only a succession of events in which the state is never quite embodied. If the author's plot is only a net, and usually an imperfect one, a net of time and event for catching what is not really a process at all, is life much more?...The bird has escaped us. But it was at least entangled in the net for several chapters...How many 'real lives' have nets that can do as much?
>
> In life and art both, as it seems to me, we are always trying to catch in our net of successive moments something that is not successive. Whether in real life there is any doctor who can tell us how to do it, so that at last either the meshes will become fine enough to hold the bird, or we be so changed that we can throw our nets away and follow the bird to its own country, is not a question for this essay. (20-21)

But it is a question for us.

It is not the TV but the computer which is making a change: that change is about *information*, and the line between fiction and nonfiction, discourse and story, teller and told is becoming finer by the day.

What are the hard questions? Are we losing childhood? Yes (but it is only one type of childhood). Are books on the way out? Yes: genuinely at revolutionary point here. Isn't the book is fighting back? No, generally. BEWARE the book that looks experimental: even iconoclastic books like *The Stinky Cheese Man* are all either intertextual to an old tradition, or intramedia.

Thus the new era is likely to be intermedia, not intramedia - and female. In all this, one underlying thread must be the dominance of the female in children's books - female writers, lecturers, publishers, readers - and it may well be that they have at last found a narrative form which is theirs.

I think it is important that a conference like this, *Sustaining the Vision* should at least end on a note which does not only sustain old visions, but nurtures new visions. We are at the point, of thinking the unthinkable in terms of story, where the role of the library may either become that of the archive or that of the interstices of the net, the facilitator, the traffic police.

I am as fond as anyone of the vision of my daughters curled with their books in a world of childhood that I can temporarily give to them, but I am constantly aware of that screen in the corner, which actually looks out to a world which they are going to have to live in the future.

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